

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

January 16, 2019

The Honorable John Barrasso
Chairman
Committee on Environment and Public
Works
410 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Tom Carper
Ranking Member
Committee on Environment and Public
Works
456 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Barrasso and Ranking Member Carper:

We write to express our concern regarding the recent discovery of the contamination of groundwater around the Florida State Fire College in Ocala, Florida, with carcinogenic fire retardant chemicals PFOS and PFOA. When the Committee considers the nomination of EPA Acting Administrator Andrew Wheeler on January 16, we respectfully request that you inquire about EPA's efforts to establish a drinking water standard for PFOS and PFOA and ask how EPA can improve its oversight and support of state drinking water programs.

The EPA pronounced in a 2016 drinking water health advisory that exposure to these chemicals – known as PFOS (perfluorooctane sulfonate) and PFOA (perfluorooctanoic acid) – can cause adverse developmental health effects in fetuses, kidney and testicular cancer, liver damage, compromised immune systems, thyroid disease, and other maladies. In August 2018, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection confirmed that PFOS and PFOA had been used at the Fire College before production of the chemicals was phased out in the early 2000s due to health concerns. Consequently, the agency told the Fire College in early September of 2018 to avoid water from the tap and drink only bottled water after the presence of PFOS and PFOA in the groundwater was confirmed.

The Florida Department of Health tested samples from nearby wells in early October and confirmed that well water being consumed by private citizens was contaminated with PFOS and PFOA. Despite the fact that the state knew about the contamination since August, the Florida Department of Health did not send letters to notify residents in the vicinity of the Fire College for four months.

Even more alarming, according to the Miami Herald and Tampa Bay Times, initial tests indicated that the water at the college contained 250 to 270 parts per trillion of these dangerous chemicals. This is more than three times higher than the EPA health advisory level of 70 parts per trillion. Many states have begun to set their standards closer to 10 parts per trillion, arguing that the EPA advisory is outdated and much too high. Still worse, contamination levels at the local mining operation registered at 12,000 parts per trillion, or 170 times greater than the EPA's health advisory level.

Ocala residents are not the first to be alarmed by PFOS and PFOA contamination. This incident follows a disturbing trend of PFOS and PFOA contamination events that have occurred across the nation in recent years. According to a recent report from the Environmental Working Group, more than 1,500 water systems across the nation may be contaminated with PFOA and PFOS. This statistic represents a startling and life-threatening example of government failing to keep pace with the latest science.

Peer-reviewed research establishing the risks of PFOA and PFOS has been around for decades. Yet EPA has still not established a national drinking water standard for PFOA and PFOS. Because these are not yet regulated contaminants, a proper system for monitoring, regulating, and sending notifications for contamination events is not yet in place.

We can see echoes of Flint in this incident in Ocala. Last year, EPA's Office of Inspector General released a report that found management weaknesses delayed an appropriate response to the Flint water crisis. In this report, EPA admitted that the agency should "strengthen oversight of state drinking water programs." The recent contamination in Ocala demonstrates that EPA still has a long way to go.

We are interested to learn if EPA is making progress on regulating PFOS and PFOA contamination in drinking water, and whether EPA will be lowering its standard of 70 parts per trillion, a standard that many scientists and state agencies believe is too high. Also, given how the current shutdown is affecting EPA, we are concerned that there is no one at EPA to ensure that state agencies have what they need to properly respond to contamination events of this sort.

We understand that there are many pressing issues the committee must consider when dealing with an important nomination such as this. We respectfully request that your committee consider this issue of public health and environmental protection and ask Acting Administrator Wheeler what EPA is doing to address inadequate oversight of state drinking water programs, especially with reference to this troubling pattern of PFOA and PFOS contamination events.

Thank you for considering our request.

Sincerely,



Debbie Wasserman Schultz
Member of Congress



Darren Soto
Member of Congress



Donna Shalala
Member of Congress



Alcee Hastings
Member of Congress



Debbie Mucarsel-Powell
Member of Congress



Kathy Castor
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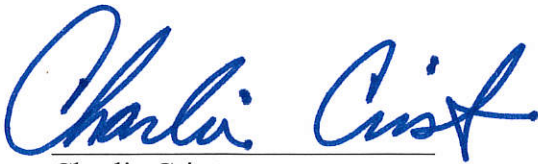
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